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# THE IMMORTALITY OF MAN

## AN INTERPRETATION

BY REV. PHILIP S. MOXOM

IN the Christian mind, belief in immortality is intimately associated with the belief in the resurrection of Jesus, which is an original and permanent element of the Christian creed. But belief in immortality antedates the fact, whether objective or subjective, of Jesus' resurrection, and, while not dependent on it, is in many minds greatly strengthened by it.

I raise the question of the resurrection of Jesus here, not to use it as an argument, but to remark that the now fixed disposition to associate that transcendent fact with the general idea of immortality is significant, though the naïve gospel stories of Jesus' bodily reappearance have less weight as evidence than in the past. This does not militate against belief in human immortality. If a friend who has died impresses himself upon me in recognizable ways as still living and influential, so that conviction of his individual persistence in being becomes absolute in my mind, it does not matter whether there be any physical reappearance or not. Indeed, a physical and tangible reappearance might confuse my belief by raising a doubt as to whether the death had not been a semblance instead of a reality. Passing from the physical through death to the physical again is no advance in life; the true advance is from the physical to the spiritual. The fatal weakness of "spiritualism" is its professed materializations. These stamp it as a reactionary rather than a progressive faith and as contradicting the logical ascent of life. If there were reason that Jesus should resume his physical body, there would seem to be reason that he should have continued in it. But this would have obstructed the revelation of the spiritual life which humanity most of all needed. That man must die is no essential contradiction of life. Death is as clearly in accordance with nature as

birth. When the physical cycle is complete it ends, not in extinction but in the beginning of a new cycle. Life passes on from the one to the other and thus mounts from stage to stage and from form to form.

However the early Christians may have conceived the resurrection of Jesus, however crude may have been the fancies in which they embodied their faith, the vital element in that faith was their conviction of the persistence of Jesus as a living personality on a new and higher plane of power and of relation to themselves. He had risen out of the limitations which necessarily invested him while in the flesh. Instead of being local and temporal he had become universal and eternal.

The essential element in our belief in his resurrection is not that Jesus resumed the physical life, but that he lives in the spirit and is henceforth the contemporary of every soul and of every age, existing *sub specie aeternitatis*. When we think of our loved ones who have died, especially of those who had reached a ripe age and had sunk under the burden of years and the process of physical decay, we do not believe or wish to believe that they can or should come back to us in physical form as we knew them; but we wish to be assured that they live in the spirit, and this is the essence of our belief in their immortality. We think of them also as existing *sub specie aeternitatis*, invested not with the earthly but with a heavenly form, finding life's fulfilment in the liberation and exaltation of personality, and thus realizing in their experience the advance in life which the resurrection of Jesus reveals as the proper sequent of earthly existence.

In the Christian belief in immortality there are two elements of especial significance. One is its firm grasp of conviction as to the persistence of personal identity; the other is its instinctive and indissoluble association of the future life with moral character. In a true sense, from the Christian point of view, immortality is a moral achievement. The supreme end of discipline in this earthly life is the development of moral personality.

It is a great misfortune that much religious teaching has separated so widely "the life that is to come" from "the life that now is." The future life, if we conceive one at all, must be not another life so much as it is a continuance of this life on a higher plane.

The processes of mental and moral activity must go on inasmuch as they are constitutive qualities of personality.

A question often asked is, "After death will there be mutual recognition of one another by kindred and friends?" The answer to this question depends on the answer to the question, "Does one live at all after death?" In discussing it now I shall hold myself closely to that phase of it already indicated, namely, the preservation of personal identity through and beyond physical dissolution. I do this because so many, confronted by the mystery of death and oppressed by the power of the senses over the imagination, sink into deepening doubt. Human love is so mingled with sensuous passion and clings so tenaciously to its visible and tangible objects, that the passing of the soul from the body seems to be the absolute passing away of the individual life. Unconsciously they identify reality with materiality, and when the latter dissolves the former seems also to vanish. Even when belief in spirit survives, it is often so vague that the sense of personality is weakened and the individual is lost in the totality of being.

It is evident that recognition after death depends on the preservation of personal identity. If you are not you, after death, of course I shall not know you; strictly speaking there will be no I and you. What reasons have we for believing that the continuity of personal existence is uninterrupted by death?

First, then, immortality involves the persistence of personality; it is not mere post mortem existence. The soul cannot be dissolved into a vague essence which somehow is absorbed into the vast whole of being. Life in the highest sense is of the soul; it is the activity of intelligence, sensibility and will and these, cohering in selfconsciousness, constitute personality. Self-consciousness is essential to personality and personality is essential to moral existence. The sense of selfhood is the persistent witness to the reality of our personal being, running through all our experiences and giving them unity and meaning. It has been affirmed that in man there is no persistent ego, but only a succession of states of consciousness which have no vital continuity. But this is absurd in view of the obvious truth that there must be something which has these states of consciousness. That

something, as Dr. Thomson, in his *Brain and Personality*, has so clearly shown, is the soul which is conscious of itself and of its multifarious experiences, fusing them into the continuity of a personal life.

The facts contributed by mental physiology on the relation of brain to mind show, not that brain produces mind, but that mind produces brain, that is, develops it into the organ of mind. The brain at birth is material which the mind shapes into the complicated instrument by which the elementary powers of sight, hearing, speech and purposeful action are developed into capabilities of distinguishing and discriminating colors, distance, the significance of sounds; of articulating words and coördinating them into the intelligent expression of thought, emotion and purpose. Different areas of the brain, and these in only one lobe, are set apart and developed for specific uses. What develops these? The inference is irresistible that an entity, an embryonic personality, acts on the brain and creates its functional capabilities. "The brain of man does not account for man"; on the contrary, man accounts for his brain. He fashions the brain into the facile instrument by which he acquires knowledge, develops power of expression, and fulfils his various functions in the vast and complex organism of human society.

By developing the brain area which is the instrument of memory and by the purposed exercise of memorizing habit he knits up his life into one whole. Thus we are bound to all our past. I am I, the same I that thought and felt and spoke as a child, that planned and strove and hoped and despaired and sinned and suffered as a man. When I cease to be I, with the full content of the ego, I cease to exist. Thus every man testifies to his persistent selfhood.

There are apparent exceptions to this, cases in which men lose consciousness or even pass for a time into a new and different consciousness. The record of such may be found in current books on psychology and kindred subjects. But these cases confessedly are exceptional and abnormal; they witness to the dependence of the psychical life on an organism for manifestation and expression. Perhaps also they indicate a largeness of the soul and a scope of inherent capabilities which for most persons lie outside

the realm of present verifiable knowledge. In this world, so far as we know, the soul or mind is dependent on a body somewhat as a musician is dependent on a musical instrument and in much the same way. But, as shattering the instrument or changing it does not annihilate the musician, so we may reasonably believe that destroying or modifying the physical organism does not annihilate the soul. Further, through all the varying phases of experience, even with temporary interruptions of the continuity of consciousness, personal identity abides.

With the persistence of self-consciousness the desire for continuance of life also persists. The desire for immortality, which is a practically universal characteristic of human nature, is a desire for personal existence through and beyond death. It has been said that the desire for personal existence after death is selfish. If this were true it would have no special bearing on the fact, but it is not true. It is no more selfish to wish to live hereafter than it is to wish to live tomorrow or to live at all. An over-refined and morbid ethicism tells us that we should be satisfied with the years, whether few or many, that are allotted to us here; but years do not constitute life. *Sat est vixisse*—it is enough to have lived—is not the verdict of the soul on mere longevity but on experience. Real life is greatness of experience, and greatness of experience does not extinguish, it stimulates and increases, the appetite for life.

On the other hand, when we consider life from the viewpoint of character, or the moral quality and powers of the soul, the desire for personal existence after death instead of being selfish becomes a noble aspiration, an exalting passion; it is a desire for life's fulfilment, the attainment of a state in which the prophetic hints of spiritual experience here shall be realized. The contrary desire, the desire to sink and die and end all thought and effort, may be selfish and cowardly. The brave soul wishes to live and to experience all that even eternal life may bring.

In the second place, the loss of personal identity, besides being the loss of existence for the individual soul, would involve a reversal of the whole process of creation or its termination in futility and failure. As Coleridge long ago suggested, the whole world of life exhibits a struggle toward individuality. Individu-

ality develops toward, and finally, in man, develops into, personality. The selfconscious moral person is the climax of the creative or evolutionary process. Thenceforth the process continues in the development of the person. The farther life advances the fuller and the more sharply defined is the personality. Common men, like savages, are much alike; great men draw apart from the mass of mankind by force of an intensified individuality, as lofty mountains, in proportion to their height, separate themselves from the continental mass of rock and earth. The best, that is the most developed, man is the most of a person; yet really great persons are not separated from their kind, from even the humblest. On the contrary, by their widened intelligence and enlarged capacity for sympathy they are more perfectly joined to all mankind. But they are distinguished from the crowd by elevation and fineness and power of personality. The loss of this developed personality would seem to be the utter failure of the divine purpose and process by which life had been brought to such consummate flower and fruit.

Man has just begun greatly to be man, and life is just beginning to open up its marvellous possibilities along the line of spiritual growth and achievement, and lo! the sudden end is a lapse of all this glorious promise and of the glorious person, man, the conscious child of God, into the gulf of nothingness. So far as we can see, such an end would stamp the universe as an insoluble riddle, a riddle putting the moral sense as well as the reason to hopeless confusion.

The preservation of personal identity alone preserves the priceless results of the educational process of life. Man carries in himself the long result of time. If personality perishes there is no perceptible meaning in the severe discipline by which he is trained and purified and unfolded into beauty and force of character. Character, the finest product, the only durable product, of time is lost with the loss of personality. Man has character; it is his quality; it is the stamp of the die on the metal which makes it coin; it is the impress of the multiplex forces which have wrought within and upon him throughout his experience—the forces of knowledge, of endeavor, of trial, of love, of resolution, of aspiration, of suffering and of hope. But he *is* a personality;

his personality is himself, the perdurable noumenon beneath all phenomena. Only by the continuance of that can the precious result of long experience be preserved. Man's life is a story begun and carried on toward sublime meanings and suddenly interrupted, inane left unfinished, if he cease to exist.

In the third place, the development and discipline of society, that perfection of the race which is the cherished dream and aspiration of all noble minds, the ideal toward which humanity continuously though often blindly gropes—the kingdom of God—involves the perpetuity of the social units, and these are persons. Society is not mere mass, an aggregation of unindividualized particles; it is a cosmos, an ordered and vital union of intelligences and wills established in permanent moral relations. If the individual perishes society perishes.

Even in this world the influence of character, that is, the influence of persons, persisting though they die, prevents human existence from being a mere succession of transient generations, mere waves following each other in endless sequence without even the unity of a sea. Society is created by personalities; it is perpetuated and led on to higher levels of thought, feeling and achievement by personalities. There is thus a demonstrable immortality of these in the ongoing life of mankind. If they cease to be, even the semblance of society must cease to be with the end of earthly existence. Thus human history becomes a prophecy without a fulfilment, a drama without a *dénouement*, a beginning without completion, and creation itself issues in failure.

If we consider the last two points in their mutual relations it becomes evident that the perfection of the individual person and the perfection of society alike require the continuance of personal identity; for the unit is necessary to the whole and, in moral beings, loss of identity is loss of being.

The two words which most accurately express the spirit and purpose of right life in the world are *culture* and *service*, but the reasons and motives which underlie both culture and service are maintained in permanent validity and vigor by the soul's deep conviction of life's unbroken continuity. There is no culmination, no true end, here. Man never perfectly fulfils his highest idea of culture nor absolutely achieves his highest ideal of service.



He ever aspires, and his noblest attainments and ministries are only prophetic of what he will become and do.

In view of all these considerations, is it not just to say that the burden of proof is on him who denies the continuance of personal identity after death? His only ground is the nature of matter, and that does not support his contention. The body decays and dies and, in the realm of sense, the soul has no instrument through which to express itself to beings dependent on sense perception. Hence he argues that the soul has perished. But the same argument would make sleep or any other form of temporary unconsciousness destructive of personal identity. It is a daily experience that he who wakes in the morning is the same person who fell asleep at night. Is it an incredible assumption that he who falls asleep in death will wake the same person into the life beyond? So, at least, by many converging lines of probability we are lead to believe. He who denies this cumulative probability, amounting to moral certainty, must prove the contrary or at least show as strong an improbability. This no one from Plato down has been able to do, and the inability rises from the fact that the denier takes account of only one phase of human experience, and that the narrower and least significant phase.

I turn now to what has been designated as "the Biblical argument." This is confined almost entirely to the New Testament, and a considerable part of it is purely inferential. When we look for explicit statements we do not readily find them. Like the being of God, the persistence of the soul, that is, the personality, is assumed, but the entire message of salvation rests on that assumption. It is this which gives meaning and weight to much of Jesus' practical teaching. This gives inspiration and scope to faith and hope. This lifts righteousness from a temporary and utilitarian morality into a permanent regimen and discipline of the will. This transforms love from a fleeting passion into an eternal and progressive experience and activity of the soul. The promises and warnings which point to the future have significance and can have validity only on the basis of personal immortality.

Certain critical moments in the experience of Jesus witness powerfully to a sense of such relation to God as only his participation in a life independent of time and death can adequately

explain. Such experiences in less degree appear in the lives of others. There are moments when the soul seems to burst its investiture of clay and to realize immortality through conscious participation in the eternal life of God.

More striking and to many persons more significant is the fact of Jesus' resurrection. I have already spoken of the transcendent nature of this fact as belonging in the sphere of spiritual rather than of sense perception, and I revert to it now because it is central among the phenomenal intimations of immortality in the New Testament. Jesus rose from the dead: so the faith and the consciousness of the earliest Christians reported. He who died was alive, whether in the body or out of the body matters not now. The disciples, at first not only incredulous but even hopeless, yielded to evidence which invaded and mastered, not merely their senses, but their minds. They felt anew the presence of the radiant personality. It was not the marks of nails and spear that convinced them, though a late report speaks of these; it was himself that awakened their dead faith to a fresh and permanent life.

Readers of the gospels often fail to realize the nature and force of Jesus' self-manifestation to the disciples. They linger over naïve and contradictory reports of the scene on the way to Emmaus, and again in the upper room where the doubt of Thomas had its dramatic removal. But these have no weight compared with the evidence which streams from the transformed characters and the heroic labors and the invincible confidence in a living Lord of these founders of Christianity. Paul had no tactual manifestation of the risen Jesus, yet it was his clear and unswerving faith in the resurrection which made him, more than all the others and next to Jesus himself, the chief founder of Christianity. To him the immortality of Jesus and his continued presence in the world were the ground and guaranty of his whole gospel.

It is a startling but inevitable reflection that the loss of personal identity in death would be the loss of Jesus to humanity, save as he survived in the meager record of his life and teaching. If he who rose from the dead and thus entered upon a higher and wider life was the Jesus who died, then we must believe that we who die will through death enter upon another life. What that life shall

be depends on the capacity and fitness which we have developed in this life. The continuity of the personal life of Jesus is no more certain than the continuity of our personal life.

If, now, personal identity survives death, in other words, if we survive death at all, as we have such strong and cumulative reasons to believe, what follows? More than I may now attempt to say, yet this much I venture to suggest: we shall know our loved ones on the other side of the estranging grave.

Eternal form shall still divide  
The eternal soul from all beside,  
And I shall know him when we meet.

PHILIP S. MOXOM.